

VISIT TO CHINA TO BUILD AND EXPAND CHINESE FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS IN U.S. SCHOOLS

by Shane Schmeichel

I traveled with 400 U.S. educators to China for a one-week educational tour in June to learn about Chinese culture and language in an effort to build and expand Chinese language programs in U.S. schools. This was a rare opportunity for me to experience China firsthand, learn about the culture, and see the dramatic pace of change under way in the world's most populated nation.

Chinese is the most widely spoken first language in the world. It is the national language of more than 1.3 billion inhabitants of China and millions more ethnic Chinese around the globe.

While in China I toured and visited with elementary schools in Hangzhou. Hangzhou is a small city with “only” 6 million people in the city limits. It is two hours south of Shanghai. An elementary school of 2,000 is considered small. The typical size of a school is closer to 3,000. Class sizes are between 40 and 50. Kids typically stay in the same room while the teachers rotate

from class to class. Teachers are subject specialists, not generalists. I did not encounter a school that had a longer day or longer year than Minnesota schools. The schedules are different than Minnesota school schedules, but not any longer. Touring schools made Minnesota schools seem like a one-room schoolhouse.

A principal in China put it best, “You come here to understand our strong academic programs, but we visit your schools to understand how creativity plays an important role in learning.” During the discussion we came to an agreement that a combination of both strengths makes a top-notch educational experience.

I should not have been surprised by the similarities between the U.S. and China educational systems, but I was. We have many of the same issues. The main difference I observed is the speed of implementation of innovative educational programs. I was not able to fully understand the funding

differences and I know they also have financial issues, but what is obvious is that the country is pouring a lot of resources into innovative educational programs that are changing the way kids in China learn.

This was just one more experience that reminded me that it is worth the fight to keep our public schools offering a well-rounded educational experience, aka, orchestra. This experience will also keep me energized when I am involved in innovative changes. What is clear is that if we stay with the status quo our students will be working from an archaic mindset. Keep up the fight of infusing the arts in your schools and don't be afraid of change.

Shane Schmeichel is the treasurer of MNSOTA and a district magnet school specialist for Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public Schools. Shane previously taught orchestra for the Robbinsdale Area Schools and the Forest Lake Area Schools. †